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# MEMOIR OF OWEN JONES WISTER, M.D.

BY

S. WEIR MITCHELL, M.D.



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[Read December 2, 1896.]

It is seldom that our Censors have asked the President to appoint a Fellow to read a memoir under the circumstances which attend the present instance. Their action needs some explanation.

Usually the biographies which cover our history for more than a century are reserved for such as have held places of distinction, for the great teachers of our art, or for those who have contributed to the literature of medicine.

Dr. Owen Jones Wister had none of these claims to be remembered. He was a suburban and country physician. He held no place as a teacher. He taught us nothing through the journals. He wrote no books or papers; and yet, what he was is instructive, and what he indirectly taught us is worthy of record and full of interest.

In other lands it would be difficult to find among physicians in country practice a personality like his, nor is it a common thing in our own land. I hope to make it clear to you why it was worth while to tell the simple story of the life of a thorough gentleman, who, with none of the larger demands on our attention, was, during a somewhat long life, an important and useful member of our profession.

The finest flower of what is most precious in our guild is not always to be found among those to whom fall even the best merited of the great prizes—the most coveted honors.

Owen Jones Wister was born October 5, 1825, at a house in



Germantown which bears on its gable a date, 1744, and J. W., the initials of its founder, after the fashion of his German fatherland. He was one of two brothers, John and Caspar Wister, who immigrated to this country in the first quarter of the last century from Wild Hillspach, a hamlet near Heidelberg, where their people had lived for generations, holding from father to son the office of huntsman to the Prince Palatine. Their house, a high-ridged, low-eaved, cross-timbered cottage, rather bigger and better than its neighbors, is still to be seen at Hillspach, and is known as the Jägerhaus, or huntsman's house. They were folk of some local consequence; but whence they came to the Palatinate, or what became of the rest of them after the emigration of Caspar and John, neither record nor tradition says; the line breaks off in the fatherland shortly afterward, to be continued in America. The brothers, who did not come out in the same year, brought with them some curious bits of old silver bearing their initials and a German Bible, apparently of the sixteenth century, with queer woodcuts. On the blank reverse of the leaf illustrating the going forth of Isaac from his father's home and the death of Abraham, one has written in German: "My father died in peace, January 13, 1726," which was after his emigration.

John and Caspar Wister settled in Philadelphia, and the latter established at Salem, New Jersey, what are said to have been the first glass works in America—flasks and wineglasses of his manufacture are still extant. The brothers were superior in education and condition, and perhaps in means, to the average German emigrant of that period, but they undoubtedly held by some fibres to this stock, which shows its sturdy and tenacious quality in the children's grandchildren. They married and multiplied. In the next generation one son was educated by the learned Tunkers, at Ephrata, Pa., with whom he afterward corresponded in Latin, which he also spoke. Another was the friend of Zinzendorf, the leader of the Moravian colony on the Lehigh, and of their Bishop, Von Schweinitz; others married with Quaker families of high standing in the Welsh settlement and joined that religious connection. Two of them signed the

Non-importation Resolutions of the Philadelphia merchants in 1765, and several of them were promoters of the beneficent and educational enterprises of that town. A century after the first of the family came to this country his descendants had made their mark on the communities to which they belonged, and had produced a man of distinction, Professor Caspar Wister.

The love of science and letters was a recurring characteristic among the already numerous branches of the family, and Charles Jones Wister, the father of Owen, was a conspicuous instance of these tastes.

Owen Jones Wister was the third son, and fifth child, of his father's second marriage, which, like the first, was to a lady of English descent.

Germantown, in 1825, was a village in the wider meaning of the term, with traditions, worthies, habits, and customs of its own, having its one street-lamp and a semi-weekly post from Philadelphia. There was a small circle of intelligent people who met each other frequently in neighborly intercourse and at that pleasant feast of bygone times—supper.

Owen Wister was never a Quaker in spirit or in letter, and in later life one of his diversions was to perplex his Quaker patients by questions as to the irreconcilable differences of doctrine to be found in William Penn's writings, which he read in pursuit of this pastime. Nevertheless, Quakerism was one of the influences that set the deepest stamp upon him. Another was the tuition of A. Bronson Alcott—Emerson's Alcott—who was brought to Germantown by the solicitous parents of the village. Mr. Alcott's singular theories of education are well known. He kept what would now be termed an infant school, and before the children knew their letters he read aloud to them the *Pilgrim's Progress*, Bulwer's *Monos and Daimonos*, the *Castle of Otranto*, and other allegorical and supernatural stories to develop their imaginations, while he developed their moral natures by such methods as punishing a culprit by chastising an innocent child.

As he grew older Owen Wister attended the Germantown Academy, and more than one school beside, which was thought



to offer peculiar advantages. He always stood high in his class, and was cited as a model scholar, particularly in mathematics; yet he never ceased to feel the want of systematic instruction and of a university education.

This period lasted until he was seventeen, when his father's means became crippled, and he first felt the necessity of doing something for himself. He met with no encouragement from his father, whose chief wish in life was to keep his children about him at any sacrifice.

The eldest son of the second marriage, who long after became our well-known Fellow, Caspar Wister, left home and went to Texas to fight the Mexicans with General Houston. Owen thought that the navy offered him the best chance, but this his father did not approve.

Then, always opposed by his father, he went into business in Philadelphia with Messrs. Thomas Morgan & Co., oil merchants. This experiment lasted but a few months, during which Owen Wister lived in town and was very unhappy. It ended by his being sent to collect a bill of a lady whom he knew, on which he left his employers.

Other plans were proposed, Mr. Charles Wister stoutly resisting any which took his favorite child from him, as they all necessarily would do, until Owen Wister decided that he would study medicine.

He began to study medicine in 1845, as was the custom, in the office of the family friend and physician, Dr. Betton, and attended lectures at the University of Pennsylvania. At Dr. Betton's he met men who were already, or were to become, leaders of the profession; with others was the brilliant Paul Goddard, many years his senior, with whom he formed a lasting friendship.

Among other privileges of his student days, Owen Wister counted the kindness of Dr. Rhea Barton, who, although at the height of his fame, was very amiable and accessible to younger men. He occasionally rode to Dr. Barton's country-house near the Rising Sun village to talk anatomy and surgery, and to the end of his life remembered with pleasure the kind-

ness of his reception and the illuminating perspicuity of those informal lectures. His reminiscences of most of his professors were humorous and not particularly respectful. He graduated in 1847 and immediately applied for a position in the navy. He received his appointment as assistant surgeon and orders to join the twenty-gun sloop-of-war *Plymouth*, in February, 1848. The country-bred lad sailed for the East India station, a three-years' cruise—a long absence and a long distance in those days.

The senior surgeon died on shore while the *Plymouth* was in China, and Dr. Hopkinson, the second in rank, was taken ill, so that for a time Owen Wister was the only medical officer on duty, and he derisively styled himself fleet-surgeon. He shared the strange, semi-princely life of the East India merchants, and met Anglo-Saxon, Christian gentlemen of education and breeding in command of opium smugglers under the eyes of British and American civil and military authorities, who were there to enforce the treaty suppressing the trade. He had the usual encounters with Chinese pirates, saw the outposts of rebel tribes encamped at the gates of Canton, and caught glimpses of the countries and races of the Antipodes. He got some habits of the world as well as of the navy and his profession, and a modicum of experience and adventure. The episode was of use to him in many ways. He sailed for home in the *Dolphin*, under command of Captain Page, with some of the old mess; they were nearly lost off Cape Horn in a tremendous storm, when the rigging froze, but reached home at the end of June, 1851.

Sea-fare brought on a dyspeptic condition which proved so obstinate that during his first half-year on shore he lost strength and weight to a serious degree. This, added to other motives, disposed him to give up the navy; he resigned in June, 1852.

He had already begun to practise in Germantown, which was no longer the village of his boyhood, having grown into a big suburban town, straggling far into the country to the north, east, and west. The opening for a young physician was exceptionally good at this juncture, and, aided by favorable cir-



cumstances, Owen Wister's success was very rapid. In the course of a few years he had the largest and most desirable practice in the place, his rounds extending from Chestnut Hill and Jenkintown to the Rising Sun village, and from beyond Cheltenham to Manayunk, a circuit of, roughly speaking, thirty miles. During seasons of sickness his visits numbered forty a day. To support such a practice he gave up one by one the amusements of his age, and was less and less often to be met except in the sick-room or on the road to it.

Germantown went on growing at the rate of a Western town; good doctors came in quick succession to do the work, of which there was plenty for them; but Owen Wister kept the lead.

In 1859 he married Miss Sarah Butler, and for the next ten years his life was an instance of devotion to his profession, such as is not often seen and ought not to be imitated. He allowed himself no recreation; he belonged to no club; he took no holiday; he sometimes let a twelvemonth pass without going even to Philadelphia, ordering his books, instruments, clothing, and managing his affairs by letter. He scarcely ever accepted an invitation in the neighborhood, yet seldom passed an entire evening at home; his evenings, like his days, belonged to his patients. The entire sum of his absences from Germantown between November, 1859, and June, 1869, would not amount to a month. The Civil War brought out his ardent patriotism in several ways: he made no charge for attendance on officers or soldiers, and joined the Home Guard, sparing time for the drills which he would not give to rest or relaxation.

To those who witnessed Owen Wister's daily life during those ten years, the wonder was that human nature could withstand such a degree of overwork for so long a time. He was warned by his colleagues; solemnly warned by his friend, Dr. Rhoads, whose health had already given way under less strain; warned by acute dyspepsia, by the aggravation of his constitutional sick headaches, which at last became terrible attacks, sometimes lasting forty-eight hours; by agonizing



neuralgia and increasing insomnia. Only his abstemious habits and the fact that for so many hours of the day he was breathing the fresh air of the open country enabled him to hold out. The years 1865, 1867, 1868, and 1869 brought death to some of his nearest and dearest relatives; twice with shocking suddenness. He did not pause in his work, although his sleeplessness and overstrained condition became alarming, until one evening he found himself unable to write a prescription. He was then nearly forty-four, but even when most out of health was taken by strangers to be under thirty-five.

He passed the summer of 1869 in vain search of repose and sleep, and, in May, 1870, he sailed for Europe with his wife and son, and remained there for three years. In London Owen Wister met Drs. Grailey Hewitt, Acland (now Sir Henry), Anstie, and Dr. Henri Gueneau de Mussy, and formed a friendly acquaintance with the last two, which was renewed in subsequent years. Even yet at this time of his best opportunity his nerves would not tolerate the least thought or talk on medical matters, which cut him off from much of the interest of intercourse with men of his own profession. His keenest enjoyment abroad arose from his truly American love for what is old. Old legends, old names, old customs, old families, old ruins, old relics, old saws and proverbs, especially if Scotch, were his delight during the first year, when he was debarred from many of a traveller's pleasures. The elasticity of his temperament, his mercurial disposition, and unquenchable animal spirits came to his aid, however, as well as the extraordinary youthfulness, mental and physical, which made him look and seem fifteen years below his age. His headaches, as we see so often, ceased by degrees as he became older, and during later life he was almost free from them and from neuralgia; he always continued to suffer more or less from dyspepsia, and although insomnia gave way before rest and change in the course of a twelvemonth, the tendency never left him altogether.

In 1873 Owen Wister came back to America, but not to Germantown, as he did not wish to be drawn into his former round.

In 1874 he settled at an old country place on the York Road, restricting his visits within certain limits and declining to practise obstetrics. Office-practice he had always discouraged by various original devices, and now by way of getting rid of it entirely he made it known that he would see only charity patients at his own house. He was surprised that this arrangement did not answer his end; his new office became a sort of free dispensary for the impecunious of the country far and near, and these he often visited for weeks during any serious illness. He resumed his place on the Board of Managers of the Germantown Hospital, on which he had served since its foundation, and became a member of the consulting staff of the Jewish Hospital, continuing to perform the duties of these positions assiduously for the rest of his life.

The political opinions of a man who lived through the fateful sixties of this century cannot be other than important as regards character. Owen Wister had grown up among Whigs, to whom the name Democrat, or, as they said, Locofoco, was an abomination. When the Whig party disappeared he passed on naturally into the Free Soil and Republican ranks.

In 1876 the corruption of the Republican party determined him to vote the Democratic ticket; but thenceforth he voted for the men he believed in as the best representatives of sound money, free-trade, civil-service reform, and other issues in which for twenty years past right has taken a stand against wrong irrespective of party lines. He never took any public part, even in local politics, but his incessant and vehement arguments and adjurations among a set of too conservative men with whom he was in familiar relations can hardly have failed to do something for good government.

As personal shyness was a first and final obstacle to his speaking in public, so a singular manual difficulty prevented his writing for publication. Though he had the deft and nimble fingers of a mechanician, he had not the easy pen of the scribe. He was forced to move his hand at each word,



almost at each letter, or his writing became illegible. As his ideas and expressions came fast his pen was always so much in arrears that he hurried over his sentences to keep up with himself. This stood in the way of his forming a style, and made writing a penance to him; his native impatience was extreme and added to the irritation caused by this discrepancy of pace; of dictation and typewriters he would have none. Yet to his few correspondents he gave generous measure, not only in frequency and length of his letters, but in their substance. His letters have every quality of his conversation.

Impatience plucked him out of the way he would go in many directions; what came hardest to him was to wait.

In learning, although facility of acquisition and a most retentive memory added to the power and habit of concentrated attention and made the process rapid, it was never easy. He chafed under it to a degree which forbade his studying for pleasure alone. As an offset to this shortcoming he had tenacity of purpose which was shown from early childhood. When a little fellow he longed for a box of soldiers, enough to make a company; none was given to him; but he had a frugal allowance of pocket money, a cent a week, and every Saturday he carried it to a small shop near home, where, among other simple imported toys, there were very well set-up little leaden soldiers at a cent a piece. He persevered in this for two years, when he had his full company, with which he manœuvred to his heart's content until the time for play-things was past. When he was forty-five he determined to learn French, of which he knew virtually nothing; he was in Rome, and the only teacher to be found was an Italian, who used nothing but French and Italian text-books. Owen Wister did not understand a word of the latter language; nevertheless he began in spite of these drawbacks, and in ten or a dozen lessons learned French sufficiently well to read upon any subject in it with entire ease, and for the rest of his life read as much French as English.

Between 1874 and 1884 Owen Wister went occasionally to New England, where he had many friends and where his son



was being educated, and to the South on business; he also went once more to Europe, but only for six weeks, on account of his wife's health.

Young people loved him and he loved them; they seemed to be his most natural companions. Children amused him, but he did not like them, and the smaller they were, the less to his fancy; yet he had great attraction for them as well as for animals, of which he was exceedingly fond. He had a peculiar mode of conversation for children and animals, and exercised a sort of spell over them, though what they made of his droll talk it were hard to divine.

For fifteen years after his return to his profession he was a busy doctor; after this his practice gradually declined, owing in part to his steady refusal to extend it beyond the circumference he drew for it in 1873, from which many of his patients moved further afield. As he said in 1891, it was drying up, leaving him work enough for a long morning and not for a whole day, except where severe cases of illness obliged him to make a second round. But he was by no means idle or inactive during this latest period. Germantown doctors had grown wiser and took holidays, during which Owen Wister was ready to look after their patients for them. He took an amount of exercise unusual for men in his profession, and which, no doubt, had much to do with prolonging his phenomenal youthfulness of appearance and address, and new if not grave responsibilities came into his life at a fortunate moment. He was elected successively to the directorship of the Philadelphia Contributionship, familiarly known as the old Hand-in-Hand Insurance Company, to that of the Library Company of Philadelphia, and to the Philadelphia Saving Fund Society. The membership of these boards involved duties which Owen Wister performed with zeal when they did not interfere with what he owed his patients. They had zest for him in differing from any which had hitherto fallen to his share.

He disliked what is generally understood as society. While in Europe from 1870 to 1873 he had some opportunity of

seeing it very agreeably. Mr. Motley was then our Minister in London, Mr. Bancroft in Berlin, Mr. Jay in Vienna, and Mr. Marsh in Rome, all old acquaintances, who received this genial companion with the friendliest hospitality. In London and Rome he had access to very pleasant circles, including some celebrated people, but he never entered into any of this heartily. When he had satisfied a passing curiosity about foreign manners, his instinct and inclination brought him back to his fireside wherever it happened to be, and it was nearly as difficult to get him to stir from it then as a quarter of a century later. The board dinners of the various Philadelphia societies to which he belonged he enjoyed thoroughly. The variety of profession and experience among the members gave their social meetings a flavor which he did not find either at dinners in general society or those where the guests were mostly of one calling, even literary men or artists who offer such variety of type. At his boards he met men with different points of view and fresh funds of information who excited his love of talking, which, however, seldom required stimulus. Owen Wister was a great talker, but not an incessant one, as he had moods and days of taciturnity. He talked not for the pleasure of hearing himself or of having others hear him, but simply because he enjoyed it, as a child enjoys running and jumping, and the spontaneousness and oddity of his utterances had something akin to that mode of progression. He was eager to talk over the books he read, and he was a constant reader, in his busiest times seldom going to bed without allowing himself two hours even if he began at midnight. As his leisure increased he read more and more, memoirs, biographies, travels, political economy and sociology, fairy stories and tales of adventure, history, and military works. He had an intuitive perception and comprehension of military situations and movements and a predilection for the subjects themselves, such as physicians have often exhibited.

Thus his years went on in the paths of his youth, and they seemed to pass over him without leaving a trace. On one occasion, when nearly sixty, he walked for half-a-day in the



mountains of Virginia, carrying a gun. The same afternoon he rode on horseback fourteen miles, and was the freshest of the whist party in the evening.

His habits remained those of a young man to the last: the cold bath, long walk, and drive in the open wagon all winter. His resistance to weather, to storm, or the extremes of heat or cold was extraordinary.

The first touch of age came with the loss of his brother Caspar, who was like him to identity in many characteristics and peculiarities, and an entire contrast to him in others; they had a more perfect understanding with each other than with any one else. Owen Wister never ceased to miss his brother. Life lacked something to him thenceforth, and to those who knew him best something of his old self was lacking. He reached the age of seventy, and few men ever looked it less. He was not made to bear old age or infirmity, and had they overtaken him he could not have said, as he did during his brief, last illness, that his life had been a very happy one; they would have broken his heart. He died February 24, 1896, after a brief illness, having been a Fellow since 1852.

It is by no means unusual for a physician of ability and amiability to be an idol to his patients. But it is proof of the charm of a strong personality, when the death of a man unknown to fame, who has been little from home during his last quarter-century, and who was never much in society, calls forth from all parts of this country and Europe, from people who were never under his care, some of whom had not seen him for twenty years, from others young enough to be his children and grandchildren, outbursts of attachment, admiration, sympathy, and personal sorrow. Such letters came by hundreds, with invariable reference to his youthfulness and spirits, his vitality and vivacity, his stimulating influence. Not one referred to his having fulfilled the appointed years of human life, or spoke of his having reached his natural term; on the contrary, the universal expression was of surprise at his having been snatched away; the most frequently recurring phrases were: "I could never connect the idea of death with him"; "he seemed to



belong to life and youth". A stranger reading them would have supposed that his end had been premature.

The bald facts of Owen Wister's life convey no true sense of the man. He was of that not rare type—an American, a republican with the belief that the monarchy of suffrage had better be limited.

In his ways and manners there was a certain directness which may have been a Quaker inheritance, but with it there were distinct personal flavors in all he said and did. In his professional life was felt the gentleman of undoubted social place; of instinctive well-mannered kindliness. I have seen few who were at need more self-contained, but that *self* contained a world of tenderness, and was most apt to overflow for the sick, the hurt of heart, the poor, and friendless. Many knew Owen Wister long and saw not this side of the man. Only after his death did his own people learn how deeply he had impressed, how generally won, the hearts of the hard-working class within reach of his sympathies.

An immense vitality was one of his values. It seemed to attract animals and fascinate children; but he talked to them as no one else did—a flow of gay, humorous chat with the abandonment of a merry youngster. Cats he had and many. A great white cat came daily when he was dressing, and then he talked as if to a child. One day she was vainly making her toilette with her tongue, after being among the coal. He was overheard to say: "You could not lick yourself clean, not if you had the tongue of men and angels." This endless humorous talk went on daily, the cat evidently entertained and purring approval.

During grave illness among his patients this boundless fund of vitality was of service. It lifted and sustained. It was then friendly, thoughtful, reassuring. When the time of convalescence arrived, and usually with those he liked, the same richness of energetic health overflowed in chat which was characterized by an originality of phrase and thought full of quaint surprises, and sparkling with unexpected flashes of humor so individually peculiar as to defy description. Now

and then you were struck by his power of condensed and picturesque statements. When some one spoke of England as like a cone inverted with a world of active life resting on that little point of island, he said: "Yes, she is like a top, she must keep on spinning or fall."

Of the difficulty of lessening the number of ignorant users of the ballot, he said: "Alas! but what man can be got to vote that he shall not vote?"

A patient complained of his inability to resist temptations. Wister laughed and said: "I yield to mine always; you know it is written that if you resist temptations they will fly from you. Now I have so few I cannot afford to have them fly away."

I could run on endlessly. The charm of this talk was the absence of effort—its easy, lightsome flow.

He seemed to me, at his best, a model of a well-read, thoughtful physician with all the aids of good breeding, acute sense of duty, absolute self-devotion, and rarely rivalled power as a talker who also knew to listen.

He was very slow to accept novelties, but in the end he was commonly found in the possession of all new resources; but perhaps a little later than they came valuably to some of us. There are those here who may have lived long enough to confess to the occasional wisdom of such hesitation.

I never think of him without recalling his views on so-called vivisection. He wished earnestly to restrict it, but became at last convinced that the methods advised and the character of its opponents did not permit him to continue to wage in their company a hopeless battle. I cannot forget with what courage he faced, as one of a minute minority, the overwhelming opinions of this College. He was painfully shy as to speech in public. Life-long friends were on the other side. He spoke on this occasion of his own views with vigor, strong feeling, and the reserve and breeding of a gentleman. Perhaps on no subject did he feel more earnestly, but it never affected in the least degree his relations to men, like myself, who held to opposite opinions as resolutely as he.

The type of the country physician is one quite apart from him of the city ; it has its grades and varieties. At the top we must place a man like the subject of this memoir.

Owen Wister was my friend ; I knew him well, but neither my thought nor affectionate memories have enabled me to paint for you this genial comrade—this most devoted physician.



